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AESTRACT

The ability to perceive such things as nuances of language, moods of people, and the temper of society may be the single most important ability students need to develop. One approach, which works well with upper elementary and junior high students, uses units involving community study with library research, observation, and interviewing as a base. Committees of students are organized to observe and examine aspects of community life--e.g., occupational opportunities, educational and transportation facilities, and language and cultural differences. This examination of community life leads into a study of literature, particularly the short story, which further develops the students' skills of observation and perception. (JM)

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# DEVELOPING PERCEPTION THROUGH OBSERVATION

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The teaching of English must always involve an intermixture of the teaching of substantive areas such as literature and grammar and the teaching of skill areas such as composition, speaking, and reading. However, the most important single ability which students need to develop is the ability to perceive. The non-perceptive individual is one who will pass through life without ever knowing fulfilment, and any substantive knowledge which he might manage to master will be arid and fruitless. He will have little to offer his fellow men, and his own efforts will yield sparse results.

Probably the English teacher can do more toward helping students develop their perceptive abilities than teachers in any other discipline. And lessons designed to heighten students' ability to perceive can be directly and profitably related to the ongoing English program. Also, of course, the English program will become increasingly meaningful to students as they become more perceptive. Literature will take on a richer meaning for them, they will be more accurate in their written descriptions, and classroom discussions will reach a new level as students become consciously aware of the means of developing their perceptive abilities.

Active and well-calculated lessons in perception are best suited to the upper elementary years and to the middle school of junior high school level, although senior high school students might also be exposed to teaching situations which have as their ultimate objective the awakening of one's perceptions. When lessons are aimed at this objective, the earlier they are broached, the better; however, the student who has never developed his perceptions well should be urged and encouraged to do so regardless of his grade level or ability level.

In dealing with a class of between twenty-five and thirty youngsters, the teacher might reasonably emphasize perception in a unit lasting from three to four weeks. The unit would involve both literature and composition as major elements; it would also involve considerably more oral English than is usually specifically dealt with in most English classes. The unit would not be identified as a unit in perception; rather its unifying theme, preferably one selected by the students, would be something such as "Occupations and Careers" or "My Community."

Assuming that the latter unit topic were chosen, the teacher would realize that his students would necessarily approach it through library study, observation, interviews, and a variety of other activities, many of them carried on outside of school. The topic must be subdivided in some logical and workable way, and students must form committees to which are delegated partial responsibility for carrying out the necessary research on the topic. In a class studying the community, one might form six communities, each consisting of four or five youngsters. Each committee would be responsible for some one aspect of the life of the community such as (1) fire and police protection in the community, (2) educational facilities including museums and libraries, (3) transportation facilities, (4) dialects and foreign languages used within the community, (5) comparison shopping in various stores and neighborhoods, and (6) occupational opportunities in the community.

The subdividing both of the major topic and of the various subtopics is best done by the students with gentle suggestions from the teacher.

Once the major topic has been decided upon, the school librarian should be informed so that materials to be used can be gathered conveniently in one corner of the library or, in the case of elementary schools, signed out to the classroom. A small student group, an Archives Committee, might work closely with the librarian in helping to select and arrange appropriate materials for the study.

In order to carry out a project of this sort successfully, students will have to learn to observe closely and perceptively, and early in the unit a carefully calculated series of activities leading to this end should be embarked upon. In essence, the teacher will attempt to forsee what skills the student will need to develop in order to carry the project forth and will try to design activities directly useful to the student in developing these skills.

The first such activity is a very simple one which may be carried on in the school, but would be better done out of school, preferably by pairs of students. The student would be asked to sit in a familiar place such as his bedroom, a seat on his school bus, the school library of cafeteria, or in the back seat of his father's car for one minute and observe this place as closely as possible. Then he would go to another place and list as accurately as possible all that he had seen. Completeness of description would be emphasized so that the student who wrote on his list simply "sofa" would be urged to be more specific and write something like "tattered dark blue sofa, rough material, sagging springs, three out-of-shape cushions, stain on top at left."

The next activity in observation would be for the student to observe for a specified length of time—one or two minutes—a store window and then to list as accurately as possible its contents. Through this exercise, the student would possibly learn something about organization, for if the window contained toilet articles, clothing, and floral decorations, for example, he would rack up a better score mentally sorting the disparate articles in the window into these three categories. If he has not done this, it might be suggested that he do so and try his luck on another shop window.

Activities in on-visual perception might be carried out in class or anywhere else. Students might be asked to be completely still for two minutes by the clock—few of them realize how long two minutes of silence can be—and then to record in list form what they heard during the two minutes. If an entire class does this, student lists should be read aloud and compared. A second element in this activity might involve a short walk on the school grounds blindfolded. This activity might concentrate on tactile sensation and might be followed by a blindfolded activity in which students taste and smell unidentified materials selected by the teacher and describe them orally or in writing.

Having been thus exposed to major areas of observation, each student should next be asked to observe a person briefly from a distance. He should describe the person and give an objective account of what the person does, being careful not to impute motives or otherwise to slip from his role as the objective observer. The next related activity in this area would be for each student to observe someone at work—a waitress, a bus driver, a street repairman—for two or three minutes and to describe the elements of the job which he has seen performed in this brief period. The student might also at this point be given a mimeographed sheet of descriptions of literary characters, many coming probably from the works of Dickens, and asked to read through them and then to try to find someone on a downtown street or on a public conveyance who possesses the essential physical characteristics of the person described by a notable author.

By this time the student will have

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begun to develop his perceptive apparatus and soon will be ready to interview people. Early mock interviews should be held in class. A list of useful interview questions should be drawn up and students should become familiar enough with them that they do not have to refer to the list in order to ask the questions. Students might next interview parents, neighbors, or other people to whom they have easy access. Finally, of course, they will interview people who can help to provide them with information which will contribute to their topical study.

At this point, the student should be exposed to short stories and other literature involving extensive description and character depiction and should be encouraged to engage in discussing the senses on which the author relied in constructing his descriptive passages. Inconsistencies in characterization and description should be noted and discussed.

If students work topically on projects such as the one suggested, a great deal of work will be done outside the classroom. Project-oriented homework is generally conceded to be superior to the typical read-write-recite variety which is so commonly assigned. One problem with this sort of approach is that in many instances students individually or in groups need to confer with the teacher about their progress. Where schools draw from an extensive geographic area, school bus schedules usually preclude a student's conferring very fully with teachers before or after school, at least for the length of time required in the sort of program here postulated. Therefore, it is vital that at least one day a week of class time be devoted to group conferences. Further a teacher might agree that one night a week will be "Open Line Night" so that students may telephone the teacher at home to discuss project work. Since a telephone discussion is different from a face-to-face encounter, the student is, through this means, exposed to another form of oral communication, and this is of significant value to a student. Naturally, the teacher must insist on reasonable limits for this sort of conference.

The student who learns early to be sensually perceptive is likely to be the student who ultimately will be perceptive to the nuances of language, perceptive of the moods of people, perceptive of the temper of his society. He will be a more creative person, and most importantly, he will be a more fulfilled person. He will not turn his back on a sunset; he will not be unresponsive in the presence of another's joy or sorrow; he will experience his world for all of the wonder which is in it; he will keep his sensors vibrating and as a result will be a happier person and a greater contributor to his society. He may even give the teacher an immediate satisfaction in approaching school with a zest which the unperceptive student cannot generate.

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